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THE OUTBOARD MOTOR blasted the morning stillness as Pete Howorth's skiff turned from our anchored trawler and sped toward Santa Cruz Island. He held a course into the mouth of an inlet opening between two cliffs about 200 feet apart. Its dark waters reached shoreward about the length of a football field to a strip of beach on which a small surf lapped volubly. A rampart of rocks rose behind it, blocking entrance to an island canyon lush with greenery.

A 300-foot nylon net was piled in the skiff's tobogganlike bow. Pete threw the motor into neutral and let the skiff slip along the base of the eastern cliff. His two-man crew, Rick Terry and Art Posch, fastened one end of the net to a spike of ancient lava near the water's edge. Pete then cruised backward across the mouth of the bight as Rick and Art paid out the net. They hooked the other end to a dark boulder rising from the sea. It was igneous, as are most rocks in southern California's Channel Island chain, pitted by the long-dead fires of ancient volcanos, looking like dark, moldy cheese, but hard as iron.

Dan Dinkler and I crouched in the recess of a shallow cave near the top of the eastern cliff wall and watched. Pete had brought us to the foot of the cliff on an earlier trip. We had crawled up the face of the wall via a narrow path naturally terraced into the rock. Dinkler unlimbered his binoculars, peering down over the edge of the seventy-foot drop. As an observer from the National Marine Fisheries, he had been assigned to monitor Pete's sea-lion collections.

The net stretched tautly across the cove, blocking the inlet to a depth of about twenty-five feet. Unless it were smart enough or lucky enough to swim under the net, no California sea lion could get past it. Pete peered into the portal of the cave opening into the base of the cliff beside the skiff. The entrance arched some four or five feet above the water, its dark depths extending to an unknown distance, one of countless caves that riddle the coast of Santa Cruz Island. Some, like this one, are small; others are vast halls of darkness linked by narrow corridors and tunnels to others honeycombing the island. Shelters against cold and heat, they are haunted by sea lions who lie along the ledges of their walls to sleep or scratch, their long muzzles often lifted in echoing vocalizations of barks and bellows, their soft, round eyes glinting in the darkness.

But if there were any now inhabiting this cave, they were both silent and invisible. Pete studied the rocks and the narrow

strip of beach inside the inlet. The only sea lion in sight was immediately above the skiff, an old, seedy-looking bull draped over a narrow ledge about ten feet up. High tide must have lifted him within climbing distance of the ledge; its ebb must have left him there, high and dry. His sun-dried fur was yellowish brown and his sagittal crest resembled a poodle's top knot. He stirred restlessly, looking down at the skiff with obvious annoyance.

I figured that Pete might stretch his net under the animal and get him to drop into it. Dan Dinkler glanced at me dryly. Pete's permit did not allow him to take a male sea lion larger than 200 pounds; females could not be over 100. "The bull on the ledge," he pointed out, "must be close to 800."

The limitations make sense. Smaller sea lions are younger and more readily acclimated to the zoos or oceanariums which order them. A younger sea lion will live longer, giving its purchaser more value for his money. And it is more trainable for the tricks and stunts which are part of every major oceanarium's repertoire of entertainment. Lastly, a younger pinniped is easier to handle and ship, no small consideration. I understood now what Pete had meant when he said that he generally found it necessary to release a half dozen captured animals for every one that was acceptable.

He gunned the motor, steering parallel to the net, then swinging the skiff into the inlet; the boat's bow skimmed over the top

ON SAFARI OFF SANTA CRUZ ISLAND

One Order for Two California Sea Lions

by Irvin Ashkenazy

of the net with the propeller tilted up to clear it. The broad-beamed craft churned from shore to shore in figure eights while Art and Rick kept smacking the water with oars to roust out any animals hiding in the far recesses of the sea cave, among the rocks on the beach, or underwater.

The old bull on the ledge wagged his doglike head in disgust at the commotion. He slapped his rear flippers against the rocky wall and, pushing himself off the ledge, dropped into the sea with a mighty splash.

The three in the skiff turned to look, Pete, no doubt, hoping that the old sea lion would get past the nylon meshes without fouling them. The prospect of having to waste time unsnarling a large, bad-tempered *Zalophus californianus* from a tangled, expensive net was decidedly unpleasant.

The seconds ticked by, measured by the intervals between the waves of a light surf that collared the beach with foam. I figured that the sea lion had made it, escaping under the net, out the inlet, and away. Pete resumed his noisy crisscrossing, back and forth, across the bight.

The center of the net suddenly twitched, then shook. Something down there was trying to push through and out. We all saw it. Even Jane, Pete's wife, noted it from the rail of the flying bridge of our mother ship anchored some 200 feet offshore. She waved, pointing, her voice lost in the din of the outboard motor.

The organization provides wild animals to zoos all over the world.

Pete swung the skiff around and sped toward the commotion. He did not fancy having to haul up the old bull and wrestle him out of the net while trying to avoid his teeth. His reflexes are usually faster than those of a sea lion's, but a few old scars testify to past captures when they were not. A sea lion's teeth are all pointed and sharp, designed for holding and cutting.

Pete reduced his speed as he approached the net, moving deliberately, warily as he came alongside. He had time. A sea lion can stay under water for nearly a half hour, its heartbeats slowing automatically from a hundred to ten a minute, its veins and arteries constricting to conserve oxygen for the brain and heart. He was in no hurry to come up.

Aided by Rick and Art, Pete began to haul on the top of the net. "Easy now," he warned. "Keep away from his head. . . ."

WE HAD SAILED the day before out of Santa Barbara's pleasant harbor, the sea a spread of dark blue velvet rubbed the wrong way by an afternoon breeze. Beforehand, we had waited for Dan Dinkler to show up. He finally did, a tall, bearded man in his early thirties. Just returned from two months of sailing off Peru as federal observer aboard an American tuna boat, he was now our observer on a cruise that, comparatively speaking, was no more than a weekend lark. His presence, however, was required by law to ensure that regulations were adhered to.

Our vessel, an elderly fifty-seven-foot trawler named *Just Love*, throbbed southward on automatic pilot toward a point on the distant horizon. Below that spot, twenty-three miles dead ahead, lay the largest of the Channel Islands, Santa Cruz, a favorite hauling-out place for sea lions. Ernie Brooks, the vessel's owner, estimated that, at a top speed of eight knots, our arrival time would be around 4 P.M.

With us was Dr. Arthur Posch, local veterinarian for the Marine Mammal Center, which Pete directs. The center is an arklike vessel which was built as a holding facility for the International Animal Exchange (IAE), headquartered in Ferndale, Michigan, and headed by Pete's associate, Brian Hunt. The organization provides wild animals of every variety to zoos and oceanariums all over the world. Pete fills its orders for seals, sea lions, and other pinnipeds (meaning "feather footed"), holding the captured animals at the center until they become acclimated to captivity and a diet of dead fish. Generally this takes no more than a week to ten days,

after which they are flown to their various destinations. Our present hunt was to fill an IAE assignment to deliver two California sea lions, a male and a female, ordered by the Roger Williams Park Zoo of Providence, Rhode Island.

We spent time loading the trawler's deck with tools and supplies for the operation. Pete had brought along long poles tipped with blunt hooks used to drag the net off a trapped sea lion; they reduced the danger of being bitten. We then loaded on the net itself, followed by the wooden capture crate and dog carriers in which to house and carry the animals once we had them aboard ship.

Considering the vast numbers of California sea lions often seen cavorting in these waters, one would think that it would be possible to bag a pair in short order.

But Pete was not so sure. With luck we might net a male the right age without having to capture too many. Perhaps because of the weather or lack of fish, not many sea lions were around today. It would probably take even longer to trap a suitable female than a male. For various reasons, there are always more bulls on Santa Cruz than cows. Some bulls migrate north as far as the coast of Washington; but most, both bulls and cows, remain in southern California waters throughout the year, rarely out of sight of a familiar island. By late April, most male sea lions head back to San Miguel Island, the most westerly of the Channel group, to reestablish their territories on the breeding grounds. The cows follow soon after, herded into the harems of competing bulls.

For three months thereafter they give birth and breed again to an awesome, thunderous cacophony of barks and bellows, of screams and roars that accompany birth and battle going on endlessly day and night.

By the third week in July, the thousands of tan and chestnut bodies, at first by ones and twos, then by tens and scores, abandon the harems and bachelor pods, waddling out to sea until the sands and rocks are once more bare of *Zalophus*, and the only sound is that of the wind and surf.

Most of their wanderings are bounded on the north by a coast which cuts sharply east at Point Conception for some fifty miles. Along this southward-facing shore, marking off the Santa Barbara Channel, lie four of the major Channel Islands, including the two largest, Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz. San Miguel is at the channel's western gate, and Anacapa its eastern.



A sea lion waif rescued by the Marine Mammal Center in Santa Barbara, California, has its breathing checked. If possible, such sick or abandoned pups are returned to the wild or found homes in zoos and oceanariums. [Irvin Ashkenazy]

Their peregrinations are bounded on the south by the other four major islands, San Nicolas, San Clemente, Santa Catalina, and the smallest of all, Santa Barbara.

The various herds play and doze the fall and winter away on island beaches, haunting innumerable caves cut by the sea into the islands' volcanic flanks. They are almost all California sea lions, which are intelligent and trainable, with a sprinkling of rovers from northern waters: huge, duller-witted Steller's sea lions (*Eumetopias jubatus*), which are aggressive and bad-tempered.

We finally winched aboard the flat-bottomed skiff which Pete had built to skim over sea-lion nets—a weighty craft called the *Lead Sled*. The name fit.

Pete and Art Posch cast off and the *Just Love* eased out of the marina and headed out across the harbor with Ernie at the wheel.

Off our port bow, anchored near the breakwater, lay Pete's square-ended "ark". Its name, *Marine Mammal Center*, was painted large across its sides. A volunteer assistant was playing surrogate Noah while he was away. The few animals held aboard would be fed their rations of mackerel; their chain-link cages and feeding pools would be cleaned. A few rescued pinniped orphans were probably also aboard. They usually were sea lion or elephant seal pups, rescued off the beach, lost, injured, or abandoned. The supply of medicines he kept aboard took care of wounds or internal parasites.

Pete is one of the few civilians licensed to salvage marine mammals from the beach. Many pups die, but those he cures are returned to the sea. If they are too disabled or too young to survive in the world, he finds them homes in various zoos and oceanariums. He cannot sell them; the only sea lions he can sell are those for which he has orders. Anyone who "rescues" a marine mammal, even with the best of intentions, must be licensed by the state and federal governments or be liable to a year in jail, a \$30,000 fine, or both.

The *Just Love* curtsied to the ground swells that greeted her as we passed the breakwater and entered the Santa Barbara Channel. Ernie piloted her from the flying bridge atop the cabin roof. It was open to the sky and the view was good despite an overcast sagging like a wet circus tent.

After two hours at a steady eight knots, a cold wind rose and we all climbed down to find refuge in the cabin. Ernie set the automatic pilot while I filled a cup of water

For three months they give birth and breed to an awesome thunderous cacophony of barks, bellows, screams and roars.



Marine mammal collector Pete Howorth and veterinarian Dr. Arthur Posch (in front of capture crate) in the *Lead Sled*, a flat-bottomed skiff

designed to skim over the nets used in taking sea lions. [Irvin Ashkenazy]

She would be housed, fed and pampered for more years than are usually given to her race in the wild.

and downed a Marazene tablet. If the seas got rougher, it would not be enough.

The island's outline began to coalesce in the hazy distance. Its twenty-one-mile length of cliffs formed a dark rampart walling off the southern horizon. As time crawled by they became defined more and more sharply, and in about forty more minutes the coast of the great island stretched east and west as far as the eye could see. Ernie took the wheel and ushered our ship into Fry's Harbor, one of the few safe anchorages on the Channel side of Santa Cruz Island.

We dined on a princely repast: steak and chanterelle mushrooms. As the sun went down the silhouettes of feral goats stood against the sky, peering down at us from the brink of a cliff. There were probably cattle in the interior valley, for the island has been a cattle ranch for years. Today much of its 62,000 acres is under the guardianship of The Nature Conservancy, a national group dedicated to the acquisition and preservation of lands containing the best examples of our natural world. Its last owner, Dr. Carey Stanton, remains on the island as its steward.

The enormous conflagration of the sunset gradually dimmed. Eventually we found our bunks. I lay listening to an oystercatcher crying counterpoint to the sea lapping against the ship's side two inches from my ear. Suddenly it was morning.

The *Lead Sled* was loaded with capture paraphernalia, the net, the hooked poles, and the crate. We lowered it overside and climbed in. Pete ferried us to the foot of the ticklish trail up the side of the cliff, then went back to pick up his two-man capture team.

THE OVERSIZED bull lion that Pete had apparently caught promised wasted time and damage to an expensive net, as well as a struggle to get rid of him. The net shook as the trio in the skiff hauled it up. A tawny head broke water as Pete reached out with one of the hooked poles. His eyes widened with surprise. "It's a different one!"

And so it was. Different and much smaller, a young sea lion that had evidently been lurking in the far end of the sea cave must have followed the old bull when he had headed out to sea under the net. Except, of course, the youngster had not followed at the same depth and, consequently, had run into the net. It may have been confused by the quality of its sonic echos reflected by the net, giving an impression, perhaps, of seaweed.

Pete heaved the capture crate overside

while dragging another fold of net from the animal. It bared its canines and struck at the pole extended toward it; it spat with a hissing snarl and blazing eyes. Pete's hand shot out as he saw an opening and grabbed the hind flippers. Art followed swiftly, slipping a noose around the rubbery black hide. He dropped the flippers in the water before the animal reacted, and Pete pulled the noose taut. The other end of the cord had been drawn through the length of the crate and out its back. As Art and Rick continued to untangle the spidery web of net from the sea lion, Pete pulled the animal, inch by inch, into the crate. They saw now that it was a female, young, and less than 100 pounds, in perfect condition. Pete slammed in a panel, closing the open end of the crate.

He piloted the *Lead Sled* back to the trawler and hauled the crate up on the deck, where we all shared Pete's glow of success. What the sea lion thought about it was probably something else. At any rate, Pete persuaded her to pass through the open end of her crate into the open door of the dog carrier that Dr. Posch had provided. She did not know—and probably could not have cared less if she had—but from now on she would be housed, fed, and pampered for more years than are usually given her race in the wild.

By midafternoon, Pete sailed west along the coast trying to locate more sea lions. Eventually, he had reached the rocky outcroppings that stand before Painted Cave. There, he turned into the boulder-lined corridor that leads to the entrance of this spectacular sea cave, a portal that looms like Dante's vision of the gates of hell, its Gothic arch rising nearly a hundred feet above the waters. With its speed cut, the *Lead Sled* moved slowly into the great cave.

Suddenly, all about us rose a bedlam of reverberating barks and bellows, stunning the senses. Bodies of sea lions glistened in the beams of flashlights as they dove from ledges along the walls. Lights probing the lofty ceiling and walls reflected many colors, abstractions of green and gold and rusty red, painted by oxides of iron and copper in the water dripping from above.

Pete returned to the inlet, ready to move his net to a new cove when he found it already straining with two male sea lions. He kept the younger animal, a sleek yearling under 200 pounds.

I hope that *Zalophus* junior likes it in Rhode Island.

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Zalophus californianus, the California sea lion, displays its characteristic sharply rising forehead. The species is probably the most abundant of the eared seals. [Charles Seaborn]

